

## Community resources

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*courage is contagious*

## Viewing cable 06DAMASCUS404, ANTI-EUROPEAN RIOTS HIT DAMASCUS, AS FOUR

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tag **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06DAMASCUS404**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">06DAMASCUS404</a>	<a href="#">2006-02-05 14:36</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">CONFIDENTIAL</a>	<a href="#">Embassy Damascus</a>

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.aftenposten.no/spesial/wikileaksdokumenter/article3959710.ece>

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OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0404/01 0361436  
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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6862  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0612  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000404

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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ANTI-EUROPEAN RIOTS HIT DAMASCUS, AS FOUR  
EMBASSIES ARE STORMED

¶1. (C) Summary: Mobs angered about cartoon depictions of the prophet Mohammed published in Europe ransacked and set on fire the Norwegian Embassy and the building housing the Danish, Chilean, and Swedish Embassies in Damascus in the late afternoon of February 4, destroying the first and heavily damaging the other three diplomatic missions. A few hundred Syrian riot police guarded the American Embassy against crowds of several hundred demonstrators, with no injuries or damage to property. Denmark has recalled its Ambassador and, along with Norway, is urging its citizens to leave Syria immediately. Despite any miscalculation, loss of control, or embarrassment it may have suffered, the regime seems to have benefited from the rioting with enhanced legitimacy in several ways. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Damascus February 5 awoke to the ugly aftermath of some of the worst rioting the city has witnessed in recent memory. The previous afternoon angry crowds stormed the building housing the Danish Embassy, as well as the Swedish and Chilean missions, ransacking all three and setting the building on fire. All three Embassies suffered extensive damage, with the first-floor Chilean Embassy suffering the worst. The Chilean DCM reported that the Embassy was completely destroyed by fire and vandalism. The streets outside were strewn with the embassy's official papers. Rioters were kept out of parts of the Danish and Swedish Embassies (except the waiting rooms) by security doors and reinforced glass.

¶3. (C) The mob then marched to the Norwegian Embassy, in the Mezzeh suburbs, and, after clashing with Syrian security forces hurriedly posted to defend the Embassy, tore down the security barriers and trashed the entire building. Rioters then set the building ablaze, gutting it entirely. Rioters at both sites raised the green religious flag favored by Hamas supporters.

¶4. (C) FRENCH EMBASSY SPARED: Rioters also tried to storm the French Embassy but hastily summoned riot police and other security forces used tear gas, water cannons, and truncheons to beat back the mob, which dispersed after two hours of volatile demonstrations. MFA Chief of Protocol told the Charge February 5 that SARG security forces had nearly lost control of the situation at the French Embassy as they had elsewhere. According to First Secretary Benedicte de Montlaur, the Embassy suffered no damage. De Montlaur attributed the lack of damage at the Embassy to the fact that the Ambassador lives on the Embassy compound, allowing the French to call for additional SARG protection more quickly than diplomats at the other three missions, which were closed for the weekend and empty. No looting or vandalism was reported anywhere except at the sites of the four diplomatic missions.

¶5. (C) THE AMERICAN EMBASSY: A few hundred Syrian riot police guarded the American Embassy against crowds of several hundred demonstrators. Although a few scuffles were reported, there were no serious attempts to penetrate the police line. No injuries or damage to property was reported. (See septel for RSO report of February 5 EAC.)

¶6. (C) DANISH EMBASSY REACTION: The Danish government has decided to recall its Ambassador to protest the SARG failure to protect its mission has decided to withdraw all non-essential personnel at the Embassy, including family members, according to a Danish diplomat. It is also encouraging all Danish citizens to leave Syria immediately and is helping to organize the evacuation via air transport later today.

¶7. (C) THE NORWEGIANS: The Norwegian Embassy's Admin Officer Marie-Louise Hansen reported on February 5 that the Embassy is also arranging to evacuate Norwegian citizens in Syria on flights out of Damascus International Airport. Hansen said that no decision has been made yet about whether the Embassy's diplomatic personnel would also leave. The

Norwegian Ambassador was in Jerusalem when the rioting occurred. It is not known yet whether he will be recalled.

¶8. (C) THE SWEDES AND CHILEANS: The Swedish Embassy is not ordering any drawdown in personnel and had made no decision as of mid-morning about whether it would recommend non-official Swedes to leave the country, reported Swedish diplomat Eva Nillson. The Chilean DCM told Polchief that he had not yet received instructions from his government but

that he expected it to come back with instructions to lodge a protest and demand extensive compensation. With only two diplomats resident in Damascus, he did not expect to see a recall or other personnel measure, especially since the Chileans were not specifically targeted but just happened to be the most accessible mission in the building with the Danes.

¶9. (U) THE SARG REACTION: The Minister of the Awqaaf and the Grand Mufti both issued statements condemning the riots and insisting that Islam encouraged dialogue as a way to deal with controversies between cultures over religious issues. The official Syrian press reported the incidents on the front pages of several Arabic-language newspapers and in the English-language Syria Times, emphasizing popular anger at the purported insults to Islam and the fact that the burning of the embassies occurred despite the extensive efforts of the SARG security forces. Only the Syria Times printed a photo actually showing the rioting in front of an embassy.

¶10. (C) When asked by the Charge to explain how the SARG had failed so miserably to protect diplomatic facilities, MFA Chief of Protocol Amir Smadi responded repeatedly that at least the SARG had protected the U.S. Embassy. He also tried to discount the damage suffered at the Danish and Swedish Embassies, but had nothing to say about the destruction the Chilean Embassy suffered. He noted that FM Shara'a had spoken with the Norwegian FM about the attack on the Embassy and had explained that the SARG had not expected demonstrations on the day they occurred. Smadi said the USG statement on the caricature of Mohammed issued several days before the rioting had been "very good, very balanced."

¶11. (C) SYRIAN CONTACTS REACT: Several of our contacts expressed shock and dismay at the violence. Typical of them, AP bureau chief Albert Aji told Polchief "I can't believe that Syrians did this." Many contacts insisted that the SARG had to have been involved in facilitating the initial stages of the demonstrations, noting that Syria is a police state where there is no right of assembly without government sanction. Many of the banners put up the day before the rioting, for example in Rawda Square, adjacent to the Embassy, had the look of official productions. Nearly all the banners had religious slogans, such as "Allah suffices you, he is all-hearing and all-knowing." A thirty-foot banner draped over the front of the biggest building near the Embassy carried a slogan, "I have not been sent to give curses. I have been sent as a mercy."

¶12. (C) SUSPICIONS OF SARG INVOLVEMENT: Civil society contacts noted that SMS text messages were sent to cellphones two days before, announcing a demonstration on February 4, in front of the Danish Embassy. These contacts also insisted, and an imam confirmed to Poloff, that the SARG (probably through its security services) had issued a "suggested" sermon for all imams to use in the mosques for the Friday prayers that preceded the Saturday rioting. Some contacts reported buses being sighted bringing in demonstrators from some of the rougher areas of Damascus, including the Palestinian camps at Yarmouk, although this could not be confirmed. One opposition contact said it was ludicrous to think that the SARG could not have prevented this rioting -- at least earlier on -- if it chose to, noting that when Riyadh Seif and several other recently released Damascus Spring detainees attempted late last week to hold a press conference, the government deployed "three hundred security officers" to prevent it. Islamist-oriented human rights activist Haithem Maleh insisted that it was SARG provocateurs

affiliated with the security services, rather than Islamists, who had stormed the embassies and egged on the crowds.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: We concur with contacts that the SARG allowed these demonstrations to occur and almost certainly helped to facilitate them at the beginning. Somewhere along the way, the SARG, true to form, seems to have miscalculated and lost control. The end result left a deeply embarrassed SARG to pick up the pieces and trying to explain its incredible security lapses to the disbelieving Europeans and Chileans. Despite any miscalculation, loss of control, or embarrassment, the minority Alawite regime seems to have benefited from the rioting, enhancing its legitimacy in several ways. It offered its religious Sunni population an opportunity to vent on an issue of visceral populist concern and it put itself in the vanguard regionally, demonstrating to the Arab street that Syria can be counted on to defend Islamic dignity. The rioting also helped the SARG in its recurring attempts to convey to the international community

that "we are the only thing standing between you and the Islamist hordes." Some argue that the riots also serve as useful distraction from recent price hikes and general hard times.

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